



Baltic Engagement
Centre for Combating
Information Disorders

BECID

STEP BY STEP: WHAT ARGUMENTS IS RUSSIA USING THIS YEAR TO MISLEAD THE BALTICS?

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Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24th last year has altered its longstanding efforts to influence the information landscape of Latvia and the Baltic States through disinformation campaigns. The escalation of the war and the subsequent international backlash against the Russian government have underscored the Kremlin's desire to restore a semblance of normalcy to its relationships, akin to the situation before February 24th.

However, it would be inaccurate to claim that Russian disinformation has undergone a significant transformation in its messaging amidst the backdrop of the war. This is primarily because Russia's foreign policy objectives have remained unchanged. Nevertheless, the conflict has provided fresh pretexts for delivering messages that have been employed for years, albeit with attempts to adapt them to the current circumstances."

BALTICS ALLEGEDLY USED ONLY FOR RUSSOPHOBIA

Throughout the winter months, pro-Kremlin websites have shifted their focus to a well-established narrative about the economic and political decline of the Baltic States, along with criticism of their leadership. However, this narrative has taken on a new twist since February 24th of last year. Various statistical indicators, particularly the rise in commodity prices and inflation rates, are cited to illustrate economic challenges in the region. Yet, these statistics are not analyzed objectively but are instead used to make politically biased assertions about the Baltic States and their allies.

Specifically, these outlets attempt to argue that the Baltic States, as European Union members, should be entitled to economic support from their allies. However, they claim that neither the European Union nor the United States has any intention of assisting us. An example cited is the Rail Baltica project, aimed at establishing a railway connection from the Baltic States to Central Europe. Critics question the project's purpose and financing, asserting that it will no longer facilitate the transportation of goods from Russia. Consequently, doubts are raised about whether the project is economically viable at all.[1]

Based on these arguments, they conclude that the European Union is neither prepared nor interested in providing financial support to the Baltic States. They suggest that our region is seen merely as a resource for larger countries to exploit, rather than as a place for fostering

competition. Additionally, this narrative is linked to a broader storyline about a crisis within the European Union, highlighting severed economic ties with Russia, lack of internal unity, and public discontent with financial assistance to Ukraine.

According to invited experts, this situation may further exacerbate divisions among EU member states, leading some to reconsider their relationships with Russia. However, the Baltic States are portrayed as an exception, as they have consistently pursued policies deemed as hostile towards Russia, primarily centered on containment and sanctions. These policies are directly cited as the root cause of all perceived adversities. [2]

This narrative persists across various publications, where efforts are made to assert that the Baltic States' role as a Russophobic entity has grown even more pronounced since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. According to pro-Kremlin outlets, the Baltic States are assigned a unique role in international politics, one where our primary objective is seen as creating a divide between Russia and the rest of Europe, serving the interests of the United States. This is aimed at preventing Russia from forging closer ties with Germany, France, and Italy to a degree that they could collectively challenge the economic might of the United States.[3]

Therefore, since February 24th of last year, our purported mission is portrayed as incessant "barking" aimed at vilifying Russia and disrupting its relations with the rest of Western Europe. In essence, the Baltic States are depicted as existing solely to weaken Russia and hinder its progress as much as possible. To underscore the perception of the Baltic region being subservient to foreign powers, it is suggested that our region is being groomed as a potential next front in a conflict against Russia should Ukraine falter.[4] The authors assert that this issue would not be handled as "delicately" as it has been in Ukraine and that Russia would swiftly resolve this "problem" within a mere three days.[5]

WESTERN EUROPE IS COMMANDED EXCLUSIVELY BY THE UNITED STATES

Nonetheless, unlike previous years, pro-Kremlin disinformation must now take into account shifting attitudes in Western countries, with Germany serving as a notable example of Russia's perceived "achievements." According to pro-Kremlin sources, the "virus" of Russophobia, initially observed in the Baltic States where they were treated as guinea pigs,

is now seen as having spread to Germany. Germany is accused of replicating the Baltic States' experiences, which involve forsaking "common sense" and economic growth in favor of Russophobia. This includes shifting away from affordable Russian resources and transitioning to alternative energy sources and suppliers.

Furthermore, what bewilders pro-Kremlin outlets is the notion in Germany of redirecting funds allocated for closing coal-fired power plants toward the defense budget. This is cited as an example of Russophobia taking precedence over decarbonization efforts.[6] Consequently, it is concluded that Germany, by blindly following the Baltic States' path, is inadvertently strangling its own economy, eroding industrial competitiveness, and exposing entrepreneurs to the risk of bankruptcy, all while accessible Russian energy resources remain underutilized. Importantly, all of these messages point to one ultimate "culprit" — the United States. Allegedly, all of these ostensibly shortsighted decisions are made in the interest of the United States and directly contribute to the reinforcement of U.S. dominance. European countries are claimed to bear a steep cost, contrary to any rational logic.

RUSSIA'S DEMILITARIZATION OF AN ALLEGEDLY AGGRESSIVE NATO IN UKRAINE

However, concerning NATO, the messaging is notably more aggressive and specific. Experts often assert that NATO's current purpose is seen as undermining Russia, indirectly supported by the belief that NATO regards not only the sovereign territories of its member states but the entire world as its sphere of influence.[7]

Alleged aggressive intentions of NATO are further substantiated by claims that it disregards Russia's concerns and interests, including Moscow's repeated objections to the expansion of U.S. military infrastructure and combat activities in not only Ukraine but also other former "Soviet territories." Consequently, by the end of 2021, Russia proposed a mutual security agreement to the United States. However, this initiative went unanswered, leading to the commencement of the current conflict.

To safeguard Russia's interests, the suggestion is made not only to respond concretely to the U.S. by continuing the modernization of Russian armed forces but also by taking specific

actions such as disrupting supply routes through which Western weaponry is delivered to Ukraine. In this context, it is emphasized that the true motivation behind the anti-Russian policy is the U.S.'s pursuit of depleting Russian resources and effectively subjugating Russia.[8]

This same idea is reiterated concerning Western military support to Ukraine, particularly NATO, which is portrayed as excessively arming Ukraine, knowing that Ukraine's defeat would imply NATO's defeat. Thus, following this line of thought, NATO is portrayed as willing to persist in its fight, even until the last of Ukrainians fall.[9]

However, from this narrative, an ostensibly positive conclusion is drawn: not only is Ukraine being "demilitarized," but NATO, as well, is depicted as rapidly depleting its arms and ammunition depots.[10]

WESTERN COUNTRIES PORTRAYED AS REMEBLING A CONCENTRATION CAMP

Pro-Kremlin websites depict the Baltic States as exhibiting Russophobia not only in their foreign policies but also in domestic affairs, pointing to ongoing investigations against individuals who express dissenting views. In all three Baltic countries, cases are cited where individuals are purportedly being brave in their willingness to cooperate with Russia and openly voice their opinions about their home country's situation. The strong reactions from state security services are dismissed as mere pretexts for alleged national security concerns. According to the authors, national political leaders are acutely aware of the political instability of their regimes and, for the purpose of intimidation, target "dissenters" to retain power and eliminate politically detrimental elements. Tatiana Ždanoka, a Member of the European Parliament, further reinforces this message by suggesting a desire for revenge in the Baltic States.[11]

The practice of persecuting those with differing viewpoints is also attributed to Germany, with claims that politically motivated investigations occur solely because some individuals deviate from the official position. Parallels are drawn to Germany's history during World War

II, insinuating that current German actions are akin to past atrocities. France, too, is accused of persecuting its own citizens merely because some refuse to remain silent.[12]

A sweeping conclusion is drawn from these allegations: it is asserted that there is no genuine democracy in Western countries, and the examples provided supposedly demonstrate how limited freedom of expression truly is. Western Europe is likened to an intellectual concentration camp, where its leaders are portrayed as willing to employ the most sinister methods in their supposed war against Russia. The authors argue that this undeniably underscores that democracy, freedom of speech, and thought are, in their view, hollow words without meaningful substance.

RUSSOPHOBIA AS THE UNIFYING ENEMY OF RUSSIANS

These messages encompass a wide range of topics but are all geared toward a common objective. They can be considered complementary, despite the typical conflict seen in disinformation messages. The concept of pervasive Russophobia, supposedly characteristic of the Baltic States, operates on multiple levels. Firstly, Russophobia, as an idea, inherently triggers negative emotions for anyone who identifies with Russia in any capacity. The Kremlin seeks to use this notion to create and validate a sense of threat. Naturally, the Kremlin positions itself as the protector of Russian "compatriots" worldwide, constructing a straightforward logical narrative: a segment of society is denied self-worth in an abstract sense, and Russia is portrayed as the only entity capable of countering it. Therefore, it's deemed essential to maintain close ties with Russia. The underlying issue is that Russia fundamentally isn't interested in societal integration processes within the Baltic States, as they risk diluting people's identification with Russia. In the Kremlin's view, anyone who identifies with Russia in any way is a tool for political influence in other countries. Consequently, Russia's intention is to instill a sense of general peril to sow mutual distrust, hampering any form of cohesion that might weaken Russia's ability to interfere in the internal affairs of sovereign states.

Secondly, accusations of alleged Russophobia are part of Russia's strategy to equate it with human rights violations, thereby prompting a broad international response. The Kremlin contends that human rights are universal and extend beyond political borders, aiming to

tarnish Latvia and the broader Western world. Simultaneously, it opens the door to raising domestic political issues, such as language education or investigating the potential justification of Kremlin aggression and violation of international sanctions, on the international stage. In this context, Russia, posing as the protector of all "compatriots," can meddle in the internal affairs of sovereign states. As an example, part of this tactic involves Russia's efforts to push UN General Assembly resolutions condemning Russophobia while demanding that countries respect human rights, which, in Kremlin parlance, translates to ceasing resistance to Russian influence. It's worth noting that directing such reproaches toward Germany and France is not uncommon and is tied to the next trend in these narratives.

Thirdly, the deliberate and tendentious emphasis on human rights issues serves as the foundation for the Kremlin's argument that life is far from superior in democracies, and the values they purportedly uphold—freedom of speech, thought, and media, as well as the sanctity of private space—are nothing more than hollow rhetoric. This is a strategic move for authoritarian regimes, as they seek to justify and legitimize themselves, particularly in light of events from the past year that may have left Russian supporters questioning the utility and competence of their existing government. The Kremlin endeavors to discredit democracies and distort their operational principles to diminish their appeal, thereby safeguarding the stability of its own regime.

Additionally, this narrative helps tarnish the reputation of pro-democracy advocates, as they are portrayed as accomplices in this flawed system. In response, the Kremlin often asserts its own contributions to the preservation of various values and principles, as if providing an answer to the democratic world. In the long run, the Kremlin aims to erode trust in democracy to bolster local politicians who will purportedly "resolve" all issues and advocate for improved relations with Russia.

IN RUSSIA, BALTIC INTERESTS ARE DEEMED VIOLATIONS

On the international stage, the Russian propaganda machine frequently employs a pretext well-illustrated by Russia's accusations against NATO, specifically regarding NATO's

enlargement and the "agreement" proposal put forth by Russia at the end of 2021. Russia portrays these actions as evidence of NATO's, primarily the United States', indifference toward Russia's interests. However, this line of reasoning underscores a contemporary Russian perspective: it implies that questions concerning the security of sovereign, albeit small, countries should somehow be resolved exclusively between Russia and the United States, one-on-one.

The enlargement of NATO and the European Union occurred through the voluntary accession of sovereign nations into formidable military and economic blocs. Russia understandably views this as disregard for its interests. However, pertinent questions arise: What precisely are Russia's interests in this context, and why have numerous Eastern and Central European nations chosen NATO membership? Furthermore, Russia's draft "agreement" on military guarantees was, in essence, an ultimatum. Accepting it would have spelled the demise of NATO as an institution and exposed an entire region, including Latvia, to a genuine threat.

This chain of logic, albeit in isolation, provides insight into pro-Kremlin disinformation and the Kremlin's logic in the public sphere. It consistently places blame on others while absolving Russia of responsibility for various events. Unsurprisingly, the primary scapegoat is the United States, which is attributed with an array of capabilities to control the actions of an entire continent. This approach allows the Kremlin to proactively deflect criticism, such as sanctions imposed on Russia or shifts in the positions of countries that were once conciliatory, like Germany. According to this narrative, Russia is not to blame for its own circumstances; instead, it's portrayed as the victim of yet another conspiracy orchestrated by the United States, aimed at humiliating Russia. On some occasions, Brussels is implicated in these conspiracies, and in other cases, the Baltic States, either collectively or individually, are depicted as setting the anti-Russian agenda. In this context, the idea of supposed mutual benefit from cooperating with Russia is subtly employed. It's essentially a campaign to shape public opinion by portraying the current situation in the most dramatic light, invoking a global conspiracy that defies common sense. Russia's ultimate goal is to renegotiate its relations with Western countries.

This tendency to seek out and attempt to prove conspiracies is also used to discredit the Baltic States. Occasionally, Western capitals are blamed for ostensibly shortsighted

decisions, which serves to highlight our perceived volatility and dependence. According to this logic, as vassals, we are portrayed as compelled to follow the shortsighted and Russophobic policies of our lords, resulting in significant losses without receiving any assistance. However, it's worth noting that this particular aspect of pro-Kremlin disinformation is not consistent, as the Baltic States are often portrayed as the primary Russophobes themselves.

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